

Nurse shortage blamed in part on lack of profs

Lawmakers investigate ways to rebuild numbers

By Bill Scanlon

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

GREELEY — Colorado faces a severe nursing shortage because there aren't enough nursing instructors, and that's because nurses take a huge pay cut to become instructors, according to testimony during a hearing here Wednesday.

U.S. Rep. Marilyn Musgrave, R-Colo., and U.S. Rep. Jon Porter, R-Nev., conducted the congressional field hearing in an effort to find out how much of the national nursing shortage can be attributed to a shortage of faculty.

"We have a huge hurdle," Kay Norton, president of the University of Northern Colorado, told the members of Congress at the UNC University Center.

A couple of UNC nursing professors have retired early, she said, and more will probably follow because "they can make \$20,000 to \$30,000 more" in clinical practice.

Clinical nurses at the height of their careers can earn \$75,000 to \$85,000 yearly, while nursing professors typically earn about \$50,000 to \$60,000.

Porter pointed out, "It's difficult for someone to go backwards" in income to become a teacher of nurses.

The nationwide nursing shortage has been well documented and the assumption has been that there just weren't enough people interested in the high-stress, high-burnout field.

But in Colorado, as in several other states, hundreds of nursing candidates are turned away because the state's colleges and universities don't have enough professors to teach them.

In Colorado in 2003, 2,600 qualified applicants were turned away from nursing programs, said Sue Carparelli, CEO of the Colorado Center for Nursing Excellence. That's about 8 percent of the national total, which puts Colorado near the top in qualified applicants turned away.

"Colorado's shortage is especially dire," Carparelli said.

Carparelli noted that the average age of Colorado nurses is 47 and keeps rising. Just 7 percent of the nurses in the state are under 30.

UNC is working with the Colorado Center for Nursing Excellence to try to establish the National Center for Nursing Education on the UNC campus, Norton said.

The newest crop of nursing professors might be mid-career nurses who get their Ph.D.s online, witnesses said.

UNC admitted 18 students in each of the past two years to its online Ph.D. program, Norton said. "The interest in and demand for the program has been overwhelming," she said.

Nurse Becky Romero submitted a statement claiming the nursing shortage is a myth.

She said the real problem is retention. Nurses leave bedside care because of intolerable working conditions in hospitals, she said.

Nurses in Colorado

- **Number:** Approximately 51,000 licensed; 30,000 working in hospitals
- **Shortfall:** About 5,000
- **Projected shortfall by 2020:** 17,000
- **Average age:** 47
- **Nursing professor shortage:** 15-25%
- **Average age of nursing professors:** 53
- **Number of qualified applicants** turned away from nursing programs in 2003: 2,600

Sources: University of Northern Colorado, SEIU Nurse Alliance of Colorado, Colorado Health Institute, Colorado Center for Nursing Excellence